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# Religion of an Oath.

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## DISCOURSE,

PROVING

### *The Danger and Immorality*

*Rash and Profane Swearing.*

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By the late Reverend and Judicious Dr. *Cloggatt*.

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Reprinted on Occasion of the Parliament's Address  
to His Majesty to Issue out His Proclamation  
against Immorality, &c.

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DISC OVERY

the Danger and Unpopularity



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T H E

• Religion of an OATH, &c.

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M A T T H. V. 34, 35, 36, 37.

*But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven, for it is God's throne: nor by the earth, for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem, for it is the City of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than this, cometh of evil.*

**T**Hat Religion and the fear of God, and a sense of his Authority, are Principles supposed by the Laws of God, is from hence evident, that in great part the process of our Courts depends upon Testimony given under the obligation of an Oath; for though the use of an Oath there, is required by Humane Authority; yet the peculiar obligation it lays upon us to speak the Truth, is antecedent to all Humane Laws, being founded originally upon our Duty to God: Wherefore though an Oath in respect of some use and

end of it, may be a Civil Act, yet in respect of the reason whereby it obligeth, it is an Act of Religion; for this reason it is highly conducive to the end of Civil Government, to maintain a sense of Religion in the minds of men; and particularly it must be of great use to make them observe those Laws of God, which are plainly designed to secure the reverence which is due to an Oath, and to keep men at a wide distance from the danger of Perjury: Such is that Law of our Saviour, which I have read to you, which therefore doth not tend more to the Honour of God, than to the Common Good of Mankind; and this no man can be ignorant of, who considers what a vast influence the use of an Oath hath upon all the Affairs of Humane Life. This is that whereby we come to confide in one another about things of the greatest moment to our lives; this is that which is so often necessary to secure our Properties, to save us from wrong, and to make even our Enemy to do us right; it is this which all Processes in Courts of Judicature are governed by, which is supposed to all Administrations of Justice, and gives an end to all Controversies about matters of Fact, which will be no otherways decided; it is this which must either direct or misguide the wisest Magistrates, and make their Sentence it self either right or wrong; and by which we are either strongly guarded against Injury, or almost inevitably exposed to it.



it. Of how great consequence therefore must it be to the good of all men, to have the reverence of an Oath secured, and to make every man tremble at the thought of Perjury, since the World cannot be well-governed, nor the Administrations of Justice go forward, without the use of Oaths? And yet we had better be without them, in as many cases as there are wherein Men are not afraid to be Forsworn. And yet alas! it is the daily complaint of our Age, That the fear of an Oath is almost banished out of the World: And although it be really a thousand times more dreadful to profane the Name of God, by calling him to be a witness to our Lies, than it would be to play before the Mouth of a Cannon while it was Firing; yet, if we may believe the Reports which are sometimes made from Courts of Judicature, there are very few Peasants so pusillanimous but they are hardy enough to Swear to any thing; and with equal confidence to contradict one another in the plainest matters, and when under an equal obligation to speak the Truth, by the Invocation of the dreadful Name of God. Now if we would enquire how the sacredness of an Oath is grown into such contempt, I do not question but the common and frequent use of Swearing in our ordinary Conversation, would be found at least accessory to that dishonour which is done to God, and that mischief to men by the so frequent Perjuries of our Age. Oaths are grown so

familiar with us, that men have forgotten the nature and true use of them, and are not sensible, that they call the Divine Vengeance upon themselves, if their Testimonies be not exactly true; they have been prostituted to the meanest Services, and profan'd by common use; and then no wonder if the Sacred Obligation peculiar to them be forgotten, when they are used in those special cases for which they ought to be reserved; therefore if we would do any thing to recover the fear of an Oath amongst our Country-men, we must endeavour to do it by means contrary to those whereby it hath been so generally lost, that is, By abstaining our selves, and not only so, but by dissuading and restraining others as much as in us lies, from that familiar and fashionable Swearing which is one of the great reproaches of our Age; to which end I shall endeavour to explain the meaning and reason of these words of our Saviour.

And in them I shall consider,

1. The Law it self, *Swear not at all; but let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay.*

2. The sanction and reason of this Law, viz. 1. The Authority of our Saviour, *But I say unto you.* 2. The nature of the thing it self, *For whatsoever is more than this, cometh of evil.*

In the Law it self we are to consider the Prohibition, and the Precept.

1. The Prohibition; which contains,

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1. A general Rule, *Swear not at all.*
2. Some particular instances whereto the Rule extends, *Neither by Heaven, nor by Earth, nor by Jerusalem, nor by thy head.*
3. The Reason why the Rule extends to these Instances; not by Heaven, *for it is God's Throne*; not by the Earth, *for it is his footstool*; not by Jerusalem; *for it is the City of the great King*; not by thy Head, *for thou canst not make one hair white or black.*

Let us begin with the general Rule, *Swear not at all.* From which words the Anabaptists and Quakers have contended, That an Oath, or an Appeal to God that what we say is true, is in no case lawful: I shall here shew the contrary, and prove, that the meaning of the Rule is this, That we are not to Swear in our common and daily Conversation with Men; and this will appear,

1. By comparing the Prohibition with the Precept.
2. With the particular instances whereunto the Prohibition extends.

1. With the Precept, *But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay, (i. e.,)* Let this be the manner of your ordinary discourse, barely to affirm or deny, or if need be, sometimes with vehemence, which perhaps is intimated by the repetition of *yea* and *nay*.

Now it is plain, if this be the sense of the Precept, that the Prohibition doth not extend to Cases which belong not to the common and

ordinary Conversation of Men, such as the deciding of Controversies for the security of the publick peace; the assuring of fidelity to the Government, and the ratifying of Leagues, &c. which are cases properly excepted from this Rule of an usual and ordinary communication with each other, because they are no part thereof: But I confess, I do not lay the stress of the proof upon this Argument only, but on this, together with the second, which is founded upon comparing the general Rule with the particular instances, whereby the use of it is explained, *neither by Heaven, for it is God's Throne, &c.* Our Saviour's design in these words cannot be better understood, than by considering what those corrupt Principles concerning the matter of Swearing were, which had crept in among the *Jews*; and first, as their own Authors tell us, it was generally held amongst them, that they ought not to Swear by the Name of God in light and trivial Cases, but they believed it was no Sin to Swear upon any occasion by a Creature that was a remarkable instance of God's Favour and Providence, as *by Heaven, or by the Earth, or by Jerusalem, or by their Head*, which are the Instances here noted by our Saviour. Secondly, some of them, and particularly the *Pharisees*, taught, that the Guilt of Perjury was not incurr'd, when a falshood was attested by these kind of Oaths, excepting only in the Cases of Swearing *by the Gold of the Temple, and the Gift*



*Gift upon the Altar*; by which Oaths they acknowledged themselves to be bound, as we find *Mat. 23.* (*i. e.*) either to speak the Truth, or to the Penalty of False-Swearing: Hence, I say, that our Saviour's words, *Swear not all, neither by Heaven, &c.* being spoken to Persons who well enough understood the Doctrines and Practises of their Countreymen in this matter, could not reasonably be thought to have any other meaning than this, That they ought not to Swear by the Creatures of God in any of those Cases wherein it is unlawful to Swear by the Almighty himself, (*i. e.*) in their usual Communication with one another: For it seems the *Jews* themselves were not arrived to that insolence, which it is so dreadful to think that Christians now-a-days should not scruple, of profaning the Name of the Most High God, by calling him at every turn to be Witness of their talk: And therefore our Saviour found it needless to forbid them Swearing by his Name, for they already believed that to be an impious thing; but he tells them, they must neither Swear by *Heaven*, nor by any thing else; as if he had said, You have been allowed to liberty of Swearing as oft as you please, provided you do not use the Name of God himself; it is ordinary with you to Swear by *Heaven*, and *Earth*, and by the *Temple*, and your *Lives* and *Souls*; and that in those Cases wherein you rightly believe it would be a profane rudeness

ness to invoke the Majesty of God directly; *But I say unto you, Swear not at all*; you shall not henceforth take the liberty, of using any kind of Oaths in those Cases wherein you are not to appeal to God himself; but upon all these occasions, whatever you assert, or whatever you promise, use the simplicity and plainness of some affirmation or denial. And thus our Saviour restrained the licentiousness of those common Swearers, that thought they might safely Swear *by Heaven*, and use the like Oaths at any time, and upon any occasion; and withal corrected that abuse which the Doctrine of the *Pharisees* had brought into this Practice, *viz.* That Men were not liable to the guilt of Perjury by such Oaths as these were; which I shall more distinctly shew under the third Head. The meaning then of our Saviour's Prohibition is not this, That it is unlawful at any time to Swear by the Name of God; but that it is unlawful to Swear by any Creature in any Case, wherein it would be so to appeal directly to the Knowledge and Justice of God himself.

2. As to those Instances by which the general Rule is explained, it is observeable,

1. That Swearing by any of the Creatures is forbidden, not only by *Heaven and Earth*, which with the rest are particularly mentioned by our Saviour, because these forms of Swearing were most in use amongst the *Jews*.

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2. We are to note, that our Saviour calls it *Swearing*, to use these forms of Speech in attesting what we say; they are not so many words lost, as we may be inclined to think, but we bring upon our selves the obligation of an Oath, by the using of them, as shall presently appear. If indeed any ways of speaking have obtained amongst us, which look like Swearing, but are not, being altogether unapt to excite any Thought of Divine Justice, I do not question, but they are to be laid aside too, because surely the Prohibition of Swearing at all, excludes not only all real, but all broken, apish and insignificant Oaths; but if it were not so, one would think that a small measure of Sobriety and Wisdom should keep a man from debasing and vilifying the acknowledged forms of speaking that are peculiar to Oaths, by applying them to such senseless sounds, as make them to signify nothing; 'Tis a good Rule which a wise man hath given, That all forms, besides those wherein there is an immediate appeal to God, are better avoided when there is need of Swearing; and when there is no need, we should not Swear at all, neither by Heaven, nor by any thing else. Let us now consider,

3. The Reasons why the Prohibition extends to these instances, and the like, Not *by Heaven*, for it is God's Throne; and he that sweareth *by Heaven*, sweareth *by the Throne of God*, and him that sitteth thereon, Matth. 23. Not *by the Earth*,

*Earth, for it is his footstool*; it is a remarkable subject of his Providence; and to Swear hereby, is in effect all one as to appeal to God that upholds it by his Power: Not *by Jerusalem*, nor any holy place that hath a peculiar relation to God, for the same reason; nor *by thy head*, for thou canst not make one hair white or black, (*i. e.*) thou hast no power over thy life, and art so unable to subsist independently upon God, that thou canst not so much as alter the colour of thine Hair: Now since thy Head, thy Life and Safety, depends upon the Divine Providence, to Swear by thy Head, and by thy Life, and consequently by thy hope of Life and Salvation, is indeed to Swear by him upon whom thou dependest for thy life, and who only hath all power to save and to destroy; so that the general reason why these Oaths are to be avoided, is because they are equivalent to formal Swearing by the Creator of all things, and contrary to the Opinion of the *Pharisees*, brought an equal Obligation upon him that used them, with Swearing downright by our Maker: Now they acknowledged, that Swearing directly by the Name of God, and where that was used, was not lawful in their ordinary occasions of speaking; our Saviour proceeds upon this supposition, and infers, Therefore it is not lawful to use those other Oaths upon those occasions, because they implied an appeal to the Justice and the Omnipresence of God himself. And thus I have endeavoured to



explain the Prohibition contained in this Law of Christ.

As for the Precept, *But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay;* it needs no farther inquiry into the sense of it, the plain meaning of them already appearing to be this: Content your selves with bare affirming and denying whatever you have occasion to speak of, without adding thereto any kind of Oaths and Imprecations.

And thus much concerning the Law it self, which one would think were as easy to be practised, as it is to be understood; and certainly it is great pity that any man should need much persuation to keep it; but if it should be so, we do not want Arguments clear and strong enough to prevail with any considering Person; and these are contained in the Sanction of this Law; which is the second thing I am to speak to, and which I have already told you is founded,

1. Upon the Authority of our Blessed Lord and Saviour.

2. Upon the Reason of the Law it self.

1. The Authority of our Saviour, who established this Law by these words, *But I say unto you.* I do not find any such express Prohibition of Swearing in ordinary Conversation as this, before our Saviour's time; not but that I think the unlawfulness of that liberty which here he abridgeth his Disciples of, might by good  
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good consequence be inferred from the Writings of *Moses*, and the Prophets; but what need we look for any other Rule in this matter besides this, which is so plain and expresse, and which we have received from the Son of God himself? There can now be no dispute, whether we may lawfully Swear in those Cases wherein an Oath is needless; for our Lord's Command is so full against it, that a question hath been made, though upon no just ground, Whether it be lawful for a Christian to Swear at all? Now if the sense of our Saviour's Authority can prevail with us to do any thing in obedience to him, it will not fail to govern us in this matter, where the performance of his Will is so easy, and the violation of it is not rewarded by any gain or pleasure, nor solicited by any Temptation that can fasten upon our sensual Lusts and Appetites; nor can be resolved easily into any other Cause, but a Spirit of Contradiction to the Gospel of our Lord; which may make us astonished, that in an Age pretending to the Worship of God, in a Nation formed into a Christian Church, so many should be found of almost all Qualities and Degrees, who bid defiance to the Authority of our Saviour, by refusing to make so small an acknowledgment of it, as the keeping of a Law so easy as this; that we should thus put into our Discourse a peculiar Character, to let the World know, that we are no Christians, though we were Baptized into the Name of Christ; lest  
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it should not be observed by our practices, that we should take care to discover it by our language, that we are none of those who believe Jesus to be the Son of God: If we had no other reason, but the Will of our Lord and Saviour to rule us in this matter, that certainly should be enough to conclude us; he that should want a farther obligation, deserves to be ranked with Heathens and Infidels; and yet the thing which our Saviour here forbids, is evil in it self too, and contains many foul and detestable Immoralities in its own nature; and therefore the common Swearer's Sin, how enormous must it needs be, who refuseth to do a very small matter to avoid so great a guilt! That the heinousness whereof may yet farther appear, I shall proceed to the

Second Consideration under this Head, *viz.* The Reason of the Law it self, which is contained in these words, Whatsoever is more than the plainness of affirmation and denial in common discourse, *cometh of evil*; I will therefore endeavour these two following things.

1. To make it appear what those evil dispositions are which this practice implies.

2. To examine the pretences that are only possible to be alledged in excuse of it. Now if men are led to it by no good Principle; if the dispositions thereunto are wholly evil; if evil be implied in the very pretences brought to excuse it; nothing can be farther desired to demonstrate that this is to be concluded, *viz.*

That

That it is an Immorality to Swear in our Communication; and whatsoever is more than that simplicity of Language which our Saviour's Rule confines us to, *cometh of evil*.

The true Principles and Causes inclining men to this practice, are these :

1. Want of Reverence towards God.
2. Carelessness of avoiding the Crime of Perjury.
3. Immodesty and Pride.

4. Lightness and vanity of mind. And indeed there must be all these things together to make up a common Swearer; for if he either had reverent Thoughts of God, or feared to be Forsworn; or if he had but a little modesty and good manners, or any tolerable measure of a steady and serious spirit, any one of these things would secure him.

1. Customary Swearing betrays great irreverence towards God; for unless a man had very mean and dishonourable Thoughts of God, how durst he make so bold with him, as to affirm nothing so silly, and transact nothing so trivial and mean, but he must summon God to be his Witness? Reverence of the Deity is always expressed by separating holy things from vile and common uses; and because an Oath is an appeal to the Knowledge and Justice of God, it is greater rudeness to press it to unnecessary Services, than it would be for the meanest of People to call the King out of his Throne to hear every idle Tale they brought  
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against one another. If an Oath be an holy thing, let us use it as we do those holy places, which we do not put to all Employments, but reserve them for their peculiar use. What a contempt of Religion would it be for men to bring their Markets into the House of God, and pretend to sanctify their worldly Affairs and Pleasures, by transacting them in the place of his Worship? I do not see but 'tis altogether as irreligious to mix our talk with Oaths upon every occasion; for hereby we make as cheap with God, as by prostituting any other Sacred thing to a common and trivial use.

2. It argues a man not to fear that horrid Crime of Perjury; for if he were afraid of it, how cautious and deliberate would he be, e're he ventured to affirm any thing upon Oath? He would consider whether it were exactly true, whether it were certain, or only probable; whether he was not liable to mistake, or misinformation, in the case, and many other things which are often necessary to come under consideration with that man that trembles at the thought of Perjury; but the light is not more clear at mid-day, than that common Swearers trouble themselves with none of these Thoughts; what they say at a venture, they boldly Swear; what they rashly utter, they as rashly add Oaths and Curses to; their habit of Swearing makes them not one jot the more wary in their talk; and the slipperiness of their Tongues, not at all the more afraid of an Oath; which is a plain Ar-

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gument, that they have little apprehension of Perjury, and are not afraid to be Forsworn; for I say, Did we ever find that those who are given to Swearing, are more deliberate and slow to speak than other men? Do they weigh their words with more exactness? Do they refrain from looseness of talk, and dissoluteness of Mirth and Jollity more than those who are content to speak upon their honest word? No, but on the contrary, they are usually more free and prodigal of their discourse; their words are guided with less consideration and judgment, and their Tongues hang more loosely in their Heads than is observable in other men; nay, it is well known, that they are then most plentiful of their Oaths, when they are least able to govern their talk with discretion, (*i. e.*) when they are drunk either with Wine or Passion; and what numerous Perjuries then in all likelihood are these men guilty of! nay, it is not improbable but some of them may be Forsworn every day they rise; for though men may please themselves with thinking that they do but swear in jest, yet the obligation of an Oath is not to be laughed away; when men swear they will do this or that, which it may be they intend not at all; or that such a thing is true, which they know is false, they are nevertheless guilty of Perjury, for not minding that they are so, since a Sin ceaseth not to be what it is, merely by the stupidity of a man's Conscience; but all that can be said in this case is, That they are not apprehensive of the guilt,

guilt, nor afraid of the crime of Perjury, which is that Immorality that I charge the common Swearer withal; and this St. *Austin* was so sensible of, that the reason which he assigns why our Saviour prohibited unnecessary Oaths, was this, *ne perjuri simus*, lest we should be forsworn, which every man is in apparent danger of, who promiscuously adds Oaths to his Talk, as I have already noted. And doubtless he that refuseth to secure himself from Perjury that way which our Saviour hath prescribed, declares plainly enough that he is not so careful against it, as a due sense of the foulness of that Sin would make him. That in the business of an Oath men are obliged to proceed with great care and deliberation, is a thing so plain, that I should be ashamed to go about the proving of it: And I am confident, if men would tie themselves to weigh the Truth of every thing they affirmed, before they would venture to Swear to it, they would spare a great many of their Oaths; and if they found it were exactly true, they would be immediately sensible, that it deserved not so solemn a confirmation, and be ashamed of the vanity of doing so great a thing to no purpose; which is a consideration that I shall by and by more particularly offer. In the mean time,

3. Needless Swearing argues Immodesty and Pride, and an arrogant spirit. Few things are more unseemly in a man, than to affirm every thing with confidence, and to be peremptory in all his talk, for this is to impose upon his

Company, and leave no room for any body to be of another mind ; and such Companions are shunned by all wise Persons, as being void of that modesty and sobriety which make men sociable and conversible ; but what shall we say to those who are not only positive and dogmatical in their common discourse, but assert every thing almost which they say, upon Oath ? Certainly in this kind of Behaviour there is as much ill Manners towards men, as there is rudeness towards God ; for what greater instance can be given of an imperious and a peremptory temper, than to seal our talk with Oaths, and leave no room for another to doubt of what we say, under the pain of accusing us of Perjury ? A modest and wise man, when he delivers his judgment in many things, where possibly he might, without fear of being accused of Arrogance, be peremptory and conclusive, yet chuseth to declare himself with that reservedness, as may invite another man to shew all his reasons to the contrary, without fear of displeasing him ; and this we all know is a great Ornament to any man's Conversation, and of excellent use to maintain peace, and good will, and good correspondence in all Societies ; But light is not more contrary to darkness, than the custom of Swearing is to this human and gentle temper ; wherefore it betrays immodesty and arrogance.

Lastly, it proceeds also from great vanity and lightness of spirit, which appears in these two plain instances of it.



The first is, in making no difference between matters of serious importance and consideration, and such as are frivolous, and of little consequence; in treating those with the same spirit and behaviour, that are suitable only to these, which is an undoubted argument of childishness, and a frothy mind; this is that which the Swearer is apparently chargeable with; for otherwise how could he in the same light humour, wherein he is delivering something to make the Company laugh, presume to prophane so sacred a thing as an Oath is, by accompanying a poor silly Jest with it? Does the taking of an Oath require no more seriousness than is necessary to the telling of a Tale? Or can it be fit to tye so grave a thing to a sentence, which if it were written down, would within an hour after, perhaps, appear hatefully ridiculous? And yet nothing is more common with those that allow themselves in this Sin.

Secondly, It is an Argument of vanity to take more pains for the confirming of what we say, than the thing doth at all deserve. It is plain, that the greatest part of our Conversation with one another by discourse and correspondence, doth not require any solemn confirmation of the truth of our words; much less the Testimony of an Oath; which being the greatest security we can give, he must be a very light-headed Companion that will throw it away at every turn, who cannot tell what was done yesterday, or make a Promise to his Friend or Acquaintance about the ordinarieſt matter,

but out comes an Oath, or a Curse, to bind his words withal: Methinks I could convince any man of ordinary sense, that there is that levity and madness implied in this custom, which if it were but seen in other things, would bring a man within the danger of *Bedlam*; for suppose a man were to make a Promise to his Friend of that kind which ordinarily happens in our Conversation, as that he would give him a Visit, or a Meeting where he should appoint, but for the present would not suffer him to go, till he had gotten an hundred of his Neighbours together to be Witnesses of his Promise; what a ridiculous Fancy would this be? And if a man should ordinarily do thus, he were likely enough to be begg'd, if any thing were to be gotten by it; for nothing is more plain, than that the ordinary assurance of a man's word is sufficient for these matters, and will either pass for them, or he had as good be banished out of human Society, or sent to some other place at least, where being not so well known, he may be the better trusted; but 'tis as clear as when the Sun shines, that he that will not make such a Promise under an Oath, nor let his Word go without calling God to witness it, by invoking his Justice and Vengeance if he falsifies, (for that's the meaning of an Oath) he does really ten thousand times more to confirm his Promise, than if he had summoned Town and Countrey together, than if he had gotten all Mankind, nay, and all the Angels in Heaven together to be Witnesses between him and his Neighbour.

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Can there readily be a more ridiculous vanity thought of than this, to give away the best security I can afford of my fidelity, upon every trifle? I wish all those who have been guilty of this Sin, would so endeavour after an ordinary Reputation amongst men, as to be ashamed of it for the future.

Thus have I shown what those evil Principles are from whence Swearing in ordinary Conversation proceeds. It comes of irreverence towards God, carelessness of being Forsworn, Immodesty and Arrogance, Lightness and Vanity of spirit; that is to say, if a man hath either the fear of God, or a detestation of Perjury, or Modesty, and good Manners, or any Sobriety and Seriousness, any one of these things will be sufficient to keep him from using needless Oaths, and therefore the common Swearer is destitute of them all; and consequently it must needs be a foul Immorality, which groweth out of a Complexion of all those evil Principles that are contrary to these good and virtuous dispositions.

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Second place, to examine the pretences that are only possible to be alledged in the excuse, or for the mitigation of this Crime; and if I can shew, that evil is implied in these also, the conclusion will yet be more evident, That whatsoever in our ordinary Conversation is beyond affirmation and denial, *cometh of evil*. I do not think that any excuses will be heard for that man who goes on in any known sin, much less

in his behalf who lives in the violation of so plain and easy a Law as this which forbids common Swearing; but because there are many given to this sin, who are ready to excuse themselves presently when they are admonish'd, and to ask your pardon, if you seem to be offended and grieved, and then think that they have given you reasonable satisfaction, as they hope they have done the like to God, by confessing that truly they ought not to swear in this fashion, and God forgive them for it, but yet they go on still to do the same thing; one would think there were some notable Temptation to this sin, which would go very far to extenuate the guilt of it, and which rendred the avoiding of it so very difficult, that all the regard which could reasonably be expected to be given to that Law of God which forbids it, is to confess our fault, and cry God's mercy every time we commit it; and that a good-natur'd man ought to be very well satisfied with the acknowledgment. I have already shewn, that this is a Sin which stands in need of an excuse as much as any: I shall now shew, that there is none less capable of an excuse, by examining what is usually pretended for it. I never heard that any Swearer ever fancied his Oaths to be for his Health, or his Wealth; that they prolong his Life, or encrease his Estate; that they give the Wine a brisker flavour, or bring the Gamester any good luck; that they ease him of his pains, or set off his Pleasures. I suppose you are all sensible, that these pretences would be very ridiculous, and truly they are not much better that follow; as,

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First of all, That they are an Ornament to a man's discourse; that they set off his language; and if they are well placed, they make a sentence run the better. I should have been ashamed to mention this excuse, but that they say it goes a great way with some people. Now this very excuse betrays Fantasticalness, and Pride, and comes of a foolish affectation to be counted a Wit, which every body almost knows to be an argument of a mean and degenerate spirit; the reason why at any time Oaths and profane Talk are affected for this purpose, is, because they are sometimes observed to surprize the Hearers, which makes the profane Person conceit that his Wit is acknowledged, when in truth it is only the extravagance and boldness of his Talk that is wondred at. Folly, that is something out of the road, is more commonly apt to provoke laughter, than a surprizal that is truly ingenious; and therefore for a man to have an Opinion of himself, meerly because he is able to make the Company stare upon him, ariseth from nothing but a mixture of Pride and Ignorance: As to this particular matter of Swearing, it is plain that an Oath signifies only to the affirming or denying of what is said, but adds nothing to the weight of the sense, or to the stile wherein it is exprest; it may startle a modest man, but it cannot please any wise man, because it neither mends the matter, nor helps the phrase. But is it not strange, that that should go for Wit, which the very basest of the People can make use of

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## *The Religion of an Oath.*

with as much freedom and discretion, and with as good a grace as a man of the best quality and breeding can do? for the truth is, there is nothing required to this kind of pleasantness, but to get ones forehead furnished with Impudence: which if the meanest Peasant be capable of, he is then qualified for a good Companion, meerly by having a memory large enough to take in half a dozen Oaths, and a Tongue in his Head to use them as occasion serves; which, experience shows, may be done without any natural Sagacity, or Rules of Art.

2. It is sometimes pretended by common Swearers, though I think but rarely, That men will not believe them without an Oath: and what is this but to confess, they have been so notoriously given to Lying, that no body dares trust them upon their bare word? for a man that is known to make conscience of speaking the Truth, finds no difficulty of creating a belief of what he says amongst any of his Friends, without making any appeal to God. Besides, the Oath of a common Swearer gives indeed but very little assurance of the truth of what he says; if I know a man to be afraid of an Oath, his Oath shall satisfy me beyond any other testimony that he can give; and upon the Oath of such a man, a Court of Judicature may proceed with confidence; but what regard can reasonably be had to his Oath above his simple and bare word, as we use to say, who is known to swear upon all occasions? if he does not lie, 'tis well, but of this I have no peculiar assurance by his Oath, because

because it is as ordinary with him to swear, as to speak ; and therefore in *Athens*, a Common Swearer's Oath was not allowed, nor accepted of in their Courts; and sometimes the testimony of a man of known Probity and Honour was admitted without it; this last seems to be imitated by the wisdom of our Laws, which suppose the Affeuration of a Peer to be equivalent to the Oath of another man; and therefore for another man to Swear needlessly, is to disparage the Reputation of his Fidelity; but for a man of Honour to do so, is to renounce his Privilege; and for any man to do thus, is not only to bring the honesty of his Word, but the truth of his Oath also into question.

3. The most usual excuse framed for the extenuation of this Impiety, is that of sudden Passion; thus when some men are a little provoked, or when they are surprized with some unexpected good Fortune, or any unlook'd-for misadventure befalls them, either their Rage or their Joy bursts out presently into Oaths, and they pretend they cannot help it; for they have no other way to discharge their minds, and give vent to their Passions, but by Cursing and Swearing; now is not this a plain confession, that they have lost the government of themselves, and *have no rule over their own spirits*? So common it is for men, while they are framing an excuse for one sin, to betray themselves guilty of another; what greater argument can lightly be given of an impotent mind, than that every petty accident is able to bereave one of all consideration, and make

make him cease to be his own man till the fit is over? And the truth is, though Passion be brought in to mitigate the business, yet it is plain enough, that any trifling occasion is able to set these men a swearing, that make this excuse for themselves; when provocation is alledged to mollify this Crime, one would think it must arise from no less a cause than if he should find his house in flames, or his friend attempting the honour of his bed; but upon examination, this same emotion and heat of spirit, is pleaded for the begging of your pardon, when a man swears upon the most trifling and inconsiderable occasions: And what can excuse that childishness and impotency of mind to which these men have thus given themselves over? But let never such extraordinary causes of joy, or grief, or anger, happen, it is an unmanly thing to set no bounds to these Passions, and they are never less unbridled, than when we make such undue expressions of them, as Oaths and Curses are; St. James gives us this Rule, *Above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, nor by any other Oath, James 5. 12.* But the particular Case wherein he thought this Rule was useful, was that of Affliction, for he had before exhorted them to whom he wrote, to *take the Prophets for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience*, and particularly recommended to them the meekness and patience of Job for their imitation, *ver. 10, 11.* But if they could not perfectly equal such great examples as those were, yet at least he strictly enjoins them not to be trans-



transported so far into Anger and Impatience as to break forth into Oaths : *But above all things, my brethren, swear not,* but keep your selves within the bounds of modest and Christian Language ; and that they might see that he allowed them to have a sense of the good and evil of this World, and was far from thinking it a Virtue to be stupid, and dull, and unconcerned about either the Comforts, or the Calamities of human Life ; he directs them how they may convert the Passions which are thereby excited, to an excellent and profitable use ; *Is any man among you afflicted, let him pray ; Is any merry ? let him sing Psalms, ver. 13, 15.* If any man be overtaken with worldly misery, let him turn himself to more devout and earnest Prayer, that God would either remove his burden, or give him patience under it ; if he be surprized with some new blessing, let him break forth into the Praises of God, to whose Bounty and Goodness he stands obliged for it. Thus to improve the excitations of joy and grief within us, is a demonstration that our Passions have not overwhelmed our Reason and Understanding, but left us the free use of our selves, to do what becomes us as Men and Christians ; but in either case to lash out into Oaths, is a plain token of an impotent mind, that hath no rule over it self, but is hurried away by intemperate Passions ; which is matter of so much shame to a reasonable Creature, and much more to a Disciple of Christ, that we should blush to confess so much evil against our selves, as to make it the excuse of any other Sin.

4. If Swearing be excused under the notion of a compliance with the custom of other men who are our Friends and Companions ; this pretence indeed carries a shew of civility and kind nature ; but for all that, is the silliest that can readily be thought of, and the making of it argues a mean and degenerate mind ; for although in things of an innocent and indifferent nature 'tis commendable for men to remit of their own way and humour, and to suit themselves to the customs and manners of those whom they converse with ; yet to be complaisant in all things without exception, is the way to grow as profligate and vile as the Devil would wish any man to be ; for what wickedness could want Authority, if this pretence were once admitted ? What is this but to proclaim, that a man hath lost all sense of difference between good and evil ? And that he hath left off to judge all things according to their own nature ; that he hath no more use left for his Reason ; that his Conscience is no longer in his own keeping, and that he is now fit to herd with the Beasts that follow the foremost without discretion ? The Laws of Truth and Goodness are immutable ; and another man's violation of them, gives me no dispensation to do so too ; I may not prostitute my Conscience to the Lusts of other men, who are to be governed by the Laws of God as well as I ; if they call my resolution not to provoke my Maker, an humour ; in this matter I were a Fool not to be tenacious of my own humour ; in this case there can be no reason why he that is in the right, should go over

over to him that is wrong, unless he that sets the evil example could change the nature of things, and make evil not to be evil, and sin and punishment to be other things than what they are.

Lastly, The common way of excusing rash Oaths, by pleading an habit, implieth the greatest evil of this nature that can be ; for this is but to confess that a man is guilty of this sin in the highest degree, an evil custom being the height of wickedness.

Thus both by shewing what those dispositions are which lead to common Swearing, and by considering the excuses that are usually framed in the behalf of it, I have discovered the Immorality thereof, and that it *cometh of evil*.

I might here add the Authority of Wise men, who had no particular Revelation to guide themselves by, and yet condemned this practice, and dissuaded all men from it ; for these Persons could discover the evil of it only by the light of Natural Reason, which they could not have done, if it had not been evil in its own nature. *Plato* wrote smartly against Swearing upon light causes ; *Hierocles* tells us, It is a dishonour to truth to confirm it lightly with an Oath. *Epictetus* gives this advice, Avoid Swearing altogether, if thou canst ; if not, as much as thou canst. In a word, The wise and sober Heathens were generally of this mind, That an Oath was to be reserved for Cases of necessity ; and the practice of common Swearing was not in use amongst any but Stage-players and Slaves ; nor do we ordinarily meet with Oaths in any of their Writers,

ters, excepting the Comedians, and some of their dissolute Poets; but the grave men and Philosophers took not the liberty themselves, and dehorted others from it. And this may serve to confirm us in the belief of its Immorality; for what so many wise men agreed in condemning, seems to be condemn'd as evil, by reasons common to all men, and possibly such as I have offered to your consideration; so great a shame and ignominy it is to Christians to allow themselves in a Custom so easy avoidable, that is condemned by the light of Nature, however by the Authority of the Son of God, whose Disciples we profess our selves to be.

Thus have I finished what I had to say upon this subject, having been willing to say all that was any way proper to oppose a custom tending so manifestly to the dishonour of our Nation, and the discredit of our Church, and the scandal of Christian Society, and finally, to the ruin of Mens souls for ever; for without universal obedience to the Laws of Christ, whereof this is one which I have been preaching to you, we cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, for which reason if I had chosen any other Command of our Lord and Saviour to discourse upon, I had been as vehement in urging you to the obedience of that, as I have been in pressing this.

*Now the God of mercy grant that we may walk before him blameless, and be holy in all manner of Conversation as becomes the followers of Jesus; To Him with the Father and the Holy Spirit be ascribed all honour, praise, and glory, now, and for ever. Amen.* 12 MR 58F I N I S.